SEVEN

"From Legend to Science," and Back Again? Bigfoot, Science, and the People in Post-Máo China

"*Yěrén* Fever"

One of the central concerns of any good popular book, article, movie, or museum exhibit on human origins is to paint a vivid picture of the lives of early humans—in short, to bring the bones to life. For a few people, however, such attempts have hardly been necessary. In 1956, Professors Máo Guāngnián and Wáng Zélín attended the opening ceremonies of the Běijīng Natural History Museum. They were standing in front of a reconstruction of Peking Man when Máo heard Wáng say, "This *yuánrén* [猿人, *Pithecanthropus*, or ape-human], I've seen it before!" Surprised, Máo asked, "Are your nerves all right, or do you have a little bit of a fever? Peking Man is a human ancestor from 500,000 years ago. How could you have seen it with your own eyes?!" Wáng proceeded to explain that in 1940, while on an expedition for the Yellow RiverWater Control Committee, he and others in his group had come across a half-ape, half-human creature who had been shot dead by local people. Wáng's story was the catalyst for Máo Guāngnián's long and determined investigation of such *yěrén* (野人, "wild people"). Like others after him, Máo was convinced that *yěrén* were living primates, distant relatives of modern humans, and thus

should be investigated scientifically.[1] It would be twenty years before knowledge of *yěrén* spread beyond a handful of rural communities and intellectual elites, but when it did, it lit a fire that another twenty years could not quench.

Chinese people have hardly been alone in their wild enthusiasm for creatures that dance on the boundary between the human and animal worlds. The yeti of the Himalayas, yowie of Australia, alma of Mongolia, Biaban-guli of the Caucasus, Mono Grande of the Andes, and sasquatch, Bigfeet, and skunk apes of North America have similarly emerged from legend to populate new forms of folklore and generate heated controversy.[2] Nor are stories about half-ape, half-human monsters a recent phenomenon in China. Accounts of such creatures are easily found in Chinese natural history works like Lǐ Shízhēn's *Systematic Materia Medica* (本草綱目, 1578), the encyclopedia *Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present* (古今圖書集成, published in 1726–1728), and local gazetteers. Similar monsters had been resurrected periodically in the pages of science dissemination texts of the Máo era. "Hairy people"—humans born with the atavistic trait of thick body hair—had regularly appeared in books and articles on human evolution since the republican era, and so served as a kind of precedent for using such anomalies to investigate scientifically the boundary between human and animal. The 1950s and 1960s saw some small-scale research efforts on *yěrén* by Chinese scientists from the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology. At the same time, Máo Guāngnián was conducting investigations of his own and theorizing about the possible relationships of *yěrén* to yeti, fossil apes and hominids, and modern humans themselves. Unlike the IVPP scientists, Máo was optimistic that *yěrén* represented an advanced primate unknown to science.

But it was only in the closing years of the Cultural Revolution that widespread interest in *yěrén* began to take off, generating a "*yěrén* fever" (野人熱) in the early post-Máo period that still burns today.[3] Several factors help explain its emergence in this historical period. First, as the

1. The source clearly specifies 1956, although the museum did not open until 1959. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí* [Solving the "*Yěrén*" Mystery] (Nánchāng: Jiāngxī rénmín chūbǎnshè, 1988), 51–52. Wáng Zélín was a biologist who graduated from the biology department at Dōngběi University. Máo Guāngnián was a professor at Xúzhōu Professorial Advanced Training Institute (徐州教師進修學院). It is unclear what type of education he had.

2. One of the broadest English-language treatments of these creatures can be found in Myra L. Shackley, *Wildmen: Yeti, Sasquatch and the Neanderthal Enigma* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983). For "el Mono Grande," see Pino Turolla, *Beyond the Andes: My Search for the Origins of Pre-Inca Civilization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

3. Note that in the previous chapter we encountered a "*qìgōng* fever": the early post-Máo era was a time feverish with fevers of all kinds.

intensity of political campaigns died down, people became less afraid of the consequences of associating themselves with what many identified as "superstition." Second, among the newly available Western writings scientists leapt to read and translate were materials on yeti and Bigfoot, which enjoyed a significant following in those days. Increased publishing freedoms coupled with growing commercialization further led to a proliferation of popular science and science fiction, to which the subject of *yěrén* was well suited. At the same time, a broad primitivist movement in literature and art gave a new significance to these creatures on the border between human and animal.[4]

The person credited with sparking *yěrén* fever was a historian by training, a man named Lǐ Jiàn who soon became known affectionately as "Minister of *Yěrén*" (野人部長).[5] Lǐ was the vice-secretary of a prefectural propaganda department in the mountainous area of Shénnóngjià in Húběi Province. In 1974, he began collecting reports of *yěrén* sightings from local villagers, some recent and some dating back as far as 1945. In 1976, Lǐ's findings attracted the interest of an East China Normal University professor of evolutionary theory, Liú Mínzhuàng—who was to become China's most prolific writer on *yěrén*, dubbed "Professor of *Yěrén*"—and several scientists from IVPP.[6] Teams of scientists and technicians, local officials, and rural people began tracking *yěrén* in earnest and collected dozens more reports, footprints, and even a few hair samples. The first team included the IVPP sculptor (and former Peking Man site guide) Zhào Zhōngyì so that, if they found a *yěrén*, he could sculpt a reproduction.[7] In addition to consulting Soviet and American materials on yeti and Bigfoot, respectively, researchers turned to Chinese historical sources and found consistencies between the accounts found therein and the stories currently in circulation. The *yěrén* of yore and of late had hair

4. On post-Máo "fifth-generation" filmmakers' portrayal of humans as animals and their use of the animal's point of view, see Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 91–125.

5. Lǐ's former positions included vice-director of the Institute of History at the Húběi Academy of Social Sciences. See front flap of Lǐ Jiàn, *Yěrén zhī mí* [The *Yěrén* Mystery] (Wǔhàn: Zhōngguó dìzhì dàxué chūbǎnshè, 1990). Also see Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 78; Zhāng Xiǎosōng and Bǎi Hóng, "'Yěrén' shì bàn shuì bàn xǐng de mèng ma?" [Are "*Yěrén*" a Half-Sleeping, Half-Waking Dream?], *Zhōngguó qīngnián bào*, 23 October 1980, 4.

6. According to the front flap of his *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, Liú Mínzhuàng was born in 1933 and graduated in 1956 from the biology department of East China Normal University, where he subsequently taught courses in evolutionary theory, natural dialectics, and heredity, among other subjects. He published an article on the need for a middle ground between Morganism and Lysenkoism in 1975: "Tán shēngwù jìnhuà de nèiyīn hé wàiyīn" [On Internal and External Causes in Biological Evolution], *Zìrán biànzhèng fǎ zázhì*, no. 3 (1975): 63–85. Also see Zhāng Xiǎosōng and Bǎi Hóng, "'Yěrén' shì bàn shuì," 4.

7. Zhào Zhōngyì, interview with the author, 5 November 2002.

all over their bodies, often laughed wildly when encountering humans, and occasionally abducted villagers to mate with them.

By 1977 scientists involved in the project were publishing articles in such popular science magazines as *Scientific Experiment* and the IVPP publication *Fossils*. General-interest magazines and newspapers also carried stories about the investigations, and in the 1980s book-length treatments of the *yěrén* "mystery" began appearing. Aside from local eyewitnesses and guides, scientists, technicians, and intellectuals from many fields have taken part in *yěrén* research, and scientists as well as government officials and professional writers have produced materials for popular consumption. As might be expected, *yěrén* fever spread quickly beyond the hard world of scientific facts and investigative reporting into the realm of popular and elite literature, where it became a potent way of exploring the meaning of humanity. Most notable are Nobel laureate Gāo Xíngjiàn's 1985 play *Yěrén* and his 1990 novel *Soul Mountain* (靈山), in which *yěrén* figure prominently as symbols of the primitive and pure past that modern humans seek to recover. While true of popular science in general, in this case especially, the lines between professional and popular, scientist and lay writer, official and nonofficial, sciences and humanities have been blurry.[8]

The wealth of materials on *yěrén* published in China since 1977 has been staggering, but participation in *yěrén* fever has gone beyond reading and writing. "Minister of Yěrén" Lǐ Jiàn and other enthusiasts attended the inaugural meeting of the Chinese Anthropological Society in 1981 and received endorsement from the board of directors to establish the Chinese Yěrén Investigative Research Association (中國野人考察研究會, hereafter Yěrén Association).[9] From the beginning, it was a "people-run" (民辦) association. The term "people-run" has a revolutionary pedigree dating from the populist movements of the Yán'ān period, but "people-run organizations" (like the "social organizations" discussed in the previous chapter) multiplied more quickly and took on new significance in the relatively liberal political culture of the 1980s.[10] Membership in

8. Examples of "official" pieces of *yěrén* science dissemination include the exhibit at the Shénnóngjià nature reserve and articles published in such newspapers as *People's Daily*. On difficulties delineating "popular" from "professional" science literature, see Stephen Hilgartner, "The Dominant View of Popularization: Conceptual Problems, Political Uses," *Social Studies of Science* 20 (1990): 519–539.

9. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 211–212.

10. Pauline Keating, "The Ecological Origins of the Yan'an Way," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (1994): 123–153; Edward Gu, "Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of the Cultural Public Space in Communist China (1979–1989): A Case Study of Three Intellectual Groups," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1999): 389–431; Gordon White, "Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 29 (1993): 63–87.

the Yěrén Association grew to between two and three hundred people—mostly scientists, science teachers, administrators, and people with some personal connection to the subject.[11] Its reach into the general population, however, was far greater: attendance at four exhibitions the association held in the 1980s topped four hundred thousand.[12] Many more have since traveled to Shénnóngjià and other wilderness areas with the hope of spotting, or even capturing, a *yěrén*.

Legacies of the Máo era are apparent in the recent fascination with *yěrén*. Eliminating superstition and (at least in the early years) promoting mass science have both been important rationales for pursuing *yěrén* research. Nonetheless, *yěrén* fever is decidedly a post-Máo phenomenon. As wild creatures, *yěrén* have become powerful agents in challenging authorities once considered sacrosanct and in articulating the desires and values of people living in a rapidly industrializing and commercializing society. Elusive, savage, and yet strangely human, they speak the right language for the time.

Replacing Superstition with Science

Much of the literature on *yěrén* takes the form of popular paleoanthropology. The initial investigations in the late 1970s were led by IVPP, and many of the most prominent people to research and comment on *yěrén* have been IVPP scientists and their colleagues at other institutions. Moreover, popular science materials on *yěrén* contain many of the same established themes found in popular paleoanthropology as a whole. Materials on human origins have battled superstition by seeking to replace ideas of divine creation with Engels's theory that labor created humanity. Writings on *yěrén* have similarly set out to convince audiences that *yěrén* are creatures of science, not fantasy. In doing so, they have relied on the same interpretations of human evolution promoted in their more established counterparts.

Especially before the 1980s, *yěrén* were unavoidably associated with superstition. Local legends and imperial-era texts attributed supernatural powers to these creatures, and the stories were often told side by side with stories about ghosts, demons, and monsters. Concerns about fueling superstition undoubtedly lay behind the failure of *yěrén* research to gain respectability in the early decades of the People's Republic. The Cultural Revolution brought an intensification of such views. Rural people were

11. Yuán Zhènxīn, interview with the author, 19 March 2002.
12. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiěkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 249.

punished for circulating stories about *yěrén* that "spread feudalist superstition" and threatened production by making workers afraid to tend their fields and harvest forest products.[13] It was only in the closing years of the Cultural Revolution that it became possible for Lǐ Jiàn and others to revisit the subject and begin collecting eyewitness accounts. Whereas previously the tendency had been to suppress reports, Lǐ Jiàn spearheaded the movement to investigate them instead. Yet discomfort remained. The IVPP scientist Wú Rǔkāng reportedly faced censure in 1978 upon expressing the belief that *yěrén* might exist. According to Liú Mínzhuàng's later account, Wú had been sternly told that "someone who practices natural science shouldn't believe this kind of thing. If someone told you ghosts existed, would you believe them?" Such criticisms did not prevent IVPP scientists from continuing to investigate *yěrén*, but it did cause them to scale back their efforts and take a lower profile for a time.[14]

Yěrén research and writing in the early years was not a bow to superstition, nor was it a concession to the idea that there were limits to what science could explain about the world. On the contrary, "solving the *yěrén* mystery" could and did become a way to further the goal, so important to Máo Zédōng and his followers, of replacing superstition with science. Such attempts were similar to the efforts of communist activists thirty years earlier to replace superstition with socialism through the famous opera *The White-Haired Girl*, which told audiences that a supernatural creature with human and animal characteristics had a rational explanation rooted in social realities.

Like the authors of *The White-Haired Girl*, many of those who studied and wrote about *yěrén* hoped to correct superstitious views. In fiction especially, many authors continued to blame social evils and inhumanity for causing people to flee to the mountains and become "*yěrén*."[15]

13. Zhāng Xiǎosōng and Bǎi Hóng, "'Yěrén' shì bàn shuì," 4. On state fears of superstition, see Steve A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961–1965," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006): 405–427.

14. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 139. Whether Wú Rǔkāng actually supported *yěrén* research is questionable. In addition to Liú's testimony (which has been recirculated in books by other authors), Lǐ Jiàn's family has preserved a letter Wú wrote Lǐ in June 1976 in which Wú promised to send the IVPP scientist Huáng Wànbō to Shénnóngjià to investigate. However, interviews with other paleoanthropologists (including those who support *yěrén* research) indicate that Wú was never interested in the subject. Wú ended his 1992 book *Human Origins* with the following assertion: "Many people are interested in '*yěrén*' and 'extraterrestrials.' . . . The press also often reports on them. However, as far as I know, we have only legends and conjectures without a reliable scientific basis." Wú Rǔkāng, *Rénlèi de yóulái* [Human Origins] (Běijīng: Kēxué jìshù wénxiàn chūbǎnshè, 1992), 92. If Liú's account of Wú's 1975 statements is accurate, Wú may for political reasons have expressed a view that he did not actually hold.

15. Hú Xuéchún, "Yěrén zhī mí" [The "Wildman" Mystery], *Jù yǐng yuèbào*, no. 5 (1993): 30–41; Liú Yǒuhuá, "Yěrén zhài" [*Yěrén* Camp], *Dāngdài zuòjiā* 59 (1995): 56–70; Chén Yùlóng, "'Yěrén'

21 Image of a *jué* from *Synthesis of Illustrations and Books Past and Present* (Gǔjīn túshū jíchéng, 1726–1728), reprinted in Jiāng Tíng'ān and Yún Zhōnglóng, *"Yěrén" xún zōng jì* [Tracking the "Yěrén"] (Xī'ān: Shǎnxīshěng rénmín chūbǎnshè, 1983), 102. Interestingly, the creature depicted appears female, while the encyclopedia's text entries identify "*jué*" as consisting solely of males. The creature is standing in a martial arts pose commonly used in illustrations of the famous character the Monkey King.

But most writings on *yěrén* sought answers in natural science rather than social conditions. In the 1960s, Máo Guāngnián explicitly connected his work with an attack on superstition. Máo postulated that *yěrén* were descendants of the Chinese fossil ape *Gigantopithecus*, and could be found listed as *jué* (玃) in imperial-era writings (figure 21). According to him, a key reason for thinking that *Gigantopithecus* still roamed Chinese forests was that "we do not believe in ghosts and spirits."[16] In other words, imperial-era records and recent reports of *yěrén*-like creatures had

yìshì" [A "*Yěrén*" Anecdote], *Mángzhòng*, no. 5 (1996): 39–44; Tán Tán, *Yěrén* (Běijīng: Zhōngguó wénlián chūbǎnshè, 1993).

16. Máo Guāngnián in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí xīn tàn* [New Investigations of the *Yěrén* Mystery] (Chóngqìng: Kēxué jìshù wénxiàn chūbǎnshè, 1989), 137. Máo's treatise, "The Question of *Jué* and Human Origins" (*Jué* yǔ rénlèi qǐyuán) is included in an appendix (pp. 117–165).

to have a scientific explanation. Proof of *yěrén*'s existence as an evolutionarily identifiable primate would be useful precisely for its ability to undermine appeals to ghosts as explanations for encounters with curious animals. In Máo's words, "The existence of *jué* can provide a scientific explanation for the origins of Chinese ghost stories and legends."[17]

People in the post-Máo period have similarly seen themselves to be engaged in transforming legends into science. In his 1979 account of the investigation into yeti in the Mount Everest region conducted twenty years earlier, Shàng Yùchāng suggested, "Historical experience tells us that common people [民間] often mistake animals in the natural world for imaginary animals." He went on to conclude that science would someday probably show yeti and *yěrén* to be unexceptional animals, much in the same way scientists had already shown "mermaids" simply to be marine mammals.[18]

The IVPP scientists Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō were more enthusiastic that *yěrén* would turn out to be exceptional animals, at least in the sense that they were as yet unknown to science. However, they acknowledged the legitimacy of imaginary critics, whom they paraphrased to say, "People treat *yěrén* legends like Westerners treat the Bible. Though people's accounts of *yěrén* may seem very clear and logical, so might the tens of millions of superstitious people's [accounts of] ghosts."[19] Yuán and Huáng nonetheless maintained the study of *yěrén* could and should proceed as a serious scientific investigation. They began a 1979 *Fossils* article with a quotation from Thomas Huxley's 1863 *Man's Place in Nature*, which has since graced the introductions to several other Chinese writings on *yěrén* and is also found in Russian literature on cryptozoology: "Ancient traditions, when tested by the severe processes of modern investigation, commonly enough fade away into mere dreams: but it is singular how often the dream turns out to have been a half-waking one, presaging a reality."[20] Yuán and Huáng likened their work to that of early scientists who, as Huxley recounted, transformed strange

17. Máo Guāngnián in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, 164.

18. Shàng Yùchāng, "Cóng Zhū Fēng dìqū "xuěrén" kǎochá tánqǐ" [Talking about Yeti Investigations from the Mount Everest Area], *Huàshí*, no. 3 (1979): 8.

19. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí xiàng kēxué tiāozhàn" [The "*Yěrén*" Mystery Poses a Challenge to Science], *Huàshí*, no. 1 (1979): 8.

20. Thomas H. Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature* (New York: Random House, 2001 [1863]), 3. As one of the first scientific books republished in the latter half of the Cultural Revolution, *Man's Place in Nature* had enormous influence on scientists, particularly paleoanthropologists. The quotation also appears in Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, preface, 1; and Zhāng Xiǎosōng and Bǎi Hóng, "'Yěrén' shì bàn shuì," 4. Dmitri Bayanov, of the International Center of Hominology in Moscow, used the same quotation as the epigraph for his book on evidence of *yěrén*-like creatures from folklore. Personal communication, 28 February 2005.

stories from Africa and Asia into scientific accounts of living apes.[21]

In language reminiscent of Máo's "On Practice," Liú Mínzhuàng similarly celebrated the "progression" of *yěrén* research "from myth, legend . . . this kind of primitive, beginning level, to the level of scientific investigation."[22] Thus, rather than celebrating *yěrén* as something outside the realm of science, *yěrén* scientists and popularizers justified investigations of *yěrén* as a way of replacing such legends or superstitions with a more scientific explanation. This replacement narrative is well expressed in a 1996 book on *yěrén*: "Today, superstition is the enemy of science. In history, she was also the mother of science. From making pills of immortality to smelting steel, from astrology to astronomy . . . science descended from the swaddling clothes of superstition."[23]

Scientists were not the only ones to welcome the conquest of legend by science. Fiction writer Sòng Yōuxīng vehemently denied the accusation that his 1985 story "A *Yěrén* Seeks a Mate" was a "ghost story" from "ancient myths and primitive religions" of "ignorant times." He went on to lambast the critic: "That he took this objective scientific fact [of *yěrén*'s existence] and turned it into a 'spirit' or 'ghost' just completely reveals this 'science disseminator' as an impostor and a little copycat."[24] Several of the readers who wrote Sòng fan letters defended him on this point, and one specifically noted the story's usefulness in suppressing, rather than encouraging, superstition. "Making it into a science fiction story . . . ," the reader opined, "helps disseminate scientific knowledge about *yěrén* among the masses and extinguish the masses' prejudice, ignorance, and superstition."[25]

It is not easy to identify precisely what separates proponents and opponents of "marginal" sciences like the study of *yěrén*.[26] In a sociologi-

21. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 3.

22. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 100. Compare with Máo's "On Practice," in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967–1071), 1:296.

23. Zāng Yǒngqīng, *Yěrén mí zōng* [Tracking the *Yěrén* Mystery] (Shěnyáng: Liáoníng chūbǎnshè, 1996), preface, 2.

24. The short story entitled "A *Yěrén* Seeks a Mate," written by popular science writer Sòng Yōuxīng and published in 1985 by the Guǎngxī periodical *Short Stories* (小說報), generated such a positive response that presses in Hong Kong and Běijīng soon republished it in short story collections on the subject. Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō* [*Yěrén* Legends] (Hong Kong: Xiānggǎng hǎiwān chūbǎnshè, 1986). Zǐ Fēng, ed. *Yěrén qiú'ǒu jì* [A *Yěrén* Seeks a Mate] (Běijīng: Zhōngguó mínjiān wényì chūbǎnshè, 1988). The quotation appears in Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō*, 3.

25. Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō*, 101.

26. I use the term "marginal" here because *yěrén* research has never gained complete acceptance as a valid form of scientific inquiry. Especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, *yěrén* research was far more accepted among scientific circles in China than similar research has been in the United States and other places. Moreover, from a popular angle, *yěrén* can hardly be considered "marginal."

cal study of ufology (research into UFOs), Joseph Blake divides writers on UFOs into two categories. The first group seeks "to define them as natural phenomena, thus including them within the bounds of normal science," while the second group seeks "to present UFOs as something beyond the confines of normal science." Within the first group are both "debunkers" who "are convinced that UFOs are 'nothing more than' stars, birds, swamp gas, hoaxes, or 'mass hysteria'" and also "hopefuls" who "hope to demonstrate that UFOs are secret weapons, extra-terrestrial vehicles or something else subsumable under normal science."[27] The vast majority of nonfiction writers on *yěrén* and many fiction writers as well, at least during the 1970s and 1980s, can be classified as "hopefuls" within the "normal science" approach. (In this way, they are similar to Qián Xuésēn and others who have sought to make scientific sense of supernormal *qìgōng* abilities.) Few if any have taken an explicit stand that *yěrén* lie outside the bounds of science as we know it. Rather, they have tried to confirm the existence and evolutionary origins of *yěrén* using the same methodologies found in established sciences. Shàng Yùchāng's position could perhaps be classified as that of a "debunker" in that he suggested *yěrén* were probably nothing more than ordinary animals. However, since the "hopefuls" also consider *yěrén* to be animals, the division is a fuzzy one and perhaps best characterized as a difference in degrees of confidence in the reliability of the evidence and of enthusiasm about the potential of the research to make a significant contribution to science.

The Scientific Significance of *Yěrén*

What, then, constitutes "scientific knowledge about *yěrén*" to those seeking to disseminate it? While not the only issue, the question of *yěrén*'s place in evolution has been important.[28] In answering this question, many writers on *yěrén* have relied on Engels's theory that labor created humanity and general Marxist theories on evolution and social development. This pattern appeared already in Chinese writings from the late 1950s and 1960s on yeti and *yěrén*. One theory in the Soviet Union, advanced by Boris Porshnev, posited that yeti were living descendants of Neanderthals.[29] Máo Guāngnián and the respected physical anthropologist Wú Dìngliáng doubted this hypothesis. In 1962, the *Xīnmín Evening*

27. Joseph Blake, "Ufology: The Intellectual Development and Social Context of the Study of Unidentified Flying Objects," in *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge*, Sociological Review Monograph 27, ed. Roy Wallis (Keele, U.K.: University of Keele, 1979), 315.

28. Other aspects include *yěrén*'s life cycle, mating habits, and ecology.

29. Others in the world of cryptozoology share this view. See especially Shackley, *Wildmen*.

News printed an interview with Wú in which he concluded that either yeti sightings were cases of mistaken identity or that yeti represented a primate group somewhere between apes and humans in evolutionary terms. For Wú, yeti could not be Neanderthals in part because eyewitness accounts indicated their inability to speak and engage in labor. Neanderthals, on the other hand, "belonged to the second stage of human development, had their own language, and could engage in labor."[30] In a treatise on the *yěrén* question written between 1964 and 1969 (not published until after the Cultural Revolution), Máo Guāngnián echoed these sentiments, discounting the Neanderthal theory on the basis of evidence for Neanderthal tools, language, and thought.[31]

Máo began his study by searching imperial-era texts for descriptions of similar creatures, focusing especially on *jué*. Máo then turned to the fossil record, and particularly to Chinese research on *Gigantopithecus*, a fossil ape (sometimes classified as a hominid) found only in China. Having rejected the Neanderthal theory, Máo postulated that *yěrén* were the same as *jué* and were living descendants of *Gigantopithecus*.[32] Engels's theories on human evolution—especially his discussion of labor, tool manufacture, and the liberation of the hands through bipedalism—dominated Máo's analysis.[33]

Work on *yěrén* conducted in the post-Máo period shared Máo Guāngnián's interest in human evolution and often recirculated his theories. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō's 1979 article in *Fossils* quoted at length from materials published on *Gigantopithecus* by Wú Rǔkāng beginning in 1962. Noting the similarities between Wú's descriptions of *Gigantopithecus* and descriptions of *yěrén* supplied by eyewitnesses, they concluded optimistically, "Some people say *Gigantopithecus* is extinct. This is not true!"[34] In an article published the same year in *Scientific Experiment*, Zhōu Guóxīng also made positive reference to the *Gigantopithecus* theory.[35] Another book, published in 1983, even borrowed and adapted a phylogenetic tree from a recent popular book on paleoanthropology depicting human and ape evolution in order to demonstrate the relationships between humans, *Gigantopithecus*, and *yěrén*. *Gigantopithecus* has

30. Wú Dìngliáng, "'Xuěrén' de xíngxiàng yánjiū" [Research on the Form of 'Yeti'], *Xīnmín wǎnbào*, 29 April 1962, 1.

31. Máo Guāngnián in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí,* 162–163.

32. Whether he knew it or not, a 1959 Soviet text had suggested the possibility that yeti were descended from *Gigantopithecus*. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 9.

33. Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí,* 117–165.

34. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 9.

35. Zhōu Guóxīng, "Shénnóngjià 'yěrén' kǎochá" [Investigation of Shénnóngjià "Wildman"], *Kēxué shíyàn*, no. 2 (1979): 30.

remained the most popular postulated fossil ancestor of *yěrén* in China and has attracted a following among cryptozoologists abroad as well.

"Professor of *Yěrén*" Liú Mínzhuàng appreciated Máo Guāngnián's insight with regard to *Gigantopithecus* but suggested another possibility, that *yěrén* were most closely related to *Australopithecus robustus*, a very early hominid not yet found in China but whose discovery could help support claims for human origins in China rather than Africa.[36] Liú's conclusion, which he claims to have made by 1976, was based once again on tool manufacture. In a 1979 article printed in *Encyclopedic Knowledge*, Liú noted that, according to eyewitness accounts, *yěrén* "walk erect, have their hands liberated, and can use natural tools and hunt small animals," but that they "do not have social division of labor and cannot construct even the crudest stone knives with which to labor."[37] Here, Liú was recalling Engels's "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Human" in which he asserted, "No simian hand has ever fashioned even the crudest stone knife"—a quotation that, not incidentally, also appeared in many popular materials on human evolution of the time.

Other researchers of the late 1970s and 1980s also invoked Engels in their discussions of *yěrén*'s evolutionary significance. For example, a 1983 book on *yěrén* quoted Engels several times with respect to physiology and life activities, the importance of the concept of the species, and the liberation of the hands in human evolution.[38] Engels's influence is also keenly felt in Liú Mínzhuàng's concern about depictions of *yěrén* living in monogamous pairs. In his 1988 book, Liú asserted that "*yěrén* families should be polygamous or promiscuous matrilineal families."[39] While he did not say so explicitly, this "should" clearly reflected Engels's understanding that early humans lived in a matriarchal system.

If Engels's theories provided helpful analytical tools for the study of *yěrén*, *yěrén* in turn offered the promise of additional evidence to support these theories and other Marxist principles. In 1979 Liú enthused that if a *yěrén* were captured, "Engels's theory that labor created humanity and the theory that humans originated in South Asia will have gained their strongest evidence."[40] The same year, Zhōu Guóxīng similarly asserted that data on *yěrén* "will be precious scientific material for research into

36. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 72–73.

37. Liú Mínzhuàng, "Yánzhe qíyì de jiǎoyìn" [Following Strange Footprints], *Bǎikē zhīshí*, no. 6 (1979): 80.

38. Jiāng Tíngān and Yún Zhōnglóng, *"Yěrén" xún zōng jì* [Tracking the "Yěrén"] (Xī'ān: Shǎnxī-shěng rénmín chūbǎnshè, 1983), 84–86.

39. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 199.

40. Liú Mínzhuàng, "Yánzhe qíyì," 82.

biological evolution [and] will supply important scientific evidence for Marxist dialectical materialism and historical materialism."[41] Such claims were still alive a decade later when another author suggested that *yěrén* research "not only can enrich Marx's accurate thesis regarding the creation of humans, but can also add to people's clear understanding of human ancestors and their process of evolutionary development."[42]

In addition to distinguishing *yěrén* from early hominids, Engels's theory about tool manufacture in human evolution was at times extended to differentiate *yěrén* from "primitive" humans living today. This kind of comparison was almost inevitable, not least because the term *yěrén* (as in "savage") had long been used to refer to tribal peoples.[43] In a 1986 book on the "marvels" of Shénnóngjià, the authors interviewed Liú Mínzhuàng and asked him if *yěrén* could be either "a mutated group of primitive people or evolutionarily retarded modern people." Liú responded in the negative: tool manufacturing defined humans, and there was no evidence of tool manufacturing among *yěrén*.[44]

Chinese researchers traveling to the Tibetan plateau in 1980–1981 also expressed the need to determine "whether or not these '*yěrén*' were monkeys, apes, bears, or even more primitive nationalities."[45] Here, "even more primitive" suggests a comparison with the minority nationalities the authors interviewed in their research. Similar comparisons can be found in the work of other scientists. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō used the example of the Kǔcōng people (a group discovered in the 1960s living in the forests of Yúnnán Province) as evidence against a local Húběi legend that *yěrén* were the descendants of Great Wall conscript evaders.

41. Zhōu Guóxīng, "Shénnóngjià 'yěrén' kǎochá," 30.

42. Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, preface, 1.

43. In 1908, the Chinese magazine *Science* used the term to describe indigenous Australian people. *Kēxué zázhì* 13 (11 August 1908): 409. The usage persisted after 1949, for example, in an appallingly racist passage in Wáng Shān, *Láodòng chuàngzào rénlèi* [Labor Created Humanity] (Shànghǎi: Shànghǎi qúnzhòng chūbǎnshè, 1951), 15–16. The many meanings of the term *yěrén* require that we read texts carefully and not simply rely on suggestive titles, as Dikötter appears to have done in erroneously citing a 1928 ethnology article on the "savages" of New Guinea and other places as evidence of discourse on half-ape, half-human monsters in the republican era. The article he cites is Cuī Dàiyáng's "Yěrén gètí de yuánsuǒ yǔ jièxiàn" [Characteristics and Boundaries of the Self among Savages], *Mínsú* [Ethnology] 23–24 (1928): 1–11. Dikötter translates the title as "Facts about the Wild Man." Cited in Frank Dikötter, "Hairy Barbarians, Furry Primates, and Wild Men: Medical Science and Cultural Representations of Hair in China," in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 67 and 71.

44. Máo Zhènhuá, Zhōu Hóngyóu, and Fù Wànměi, eds., *Shénnóngjià tàn qí* [Looking for Marvels in Shénnóngjià] (Běijīng: Gōngrén chūbǎnshè, 1986), 112.

45. Liú Mínzhuàng, Chén Nǎiwén, Zhāng Guóyīng, et al., *Yěrén, xuěrén, húguài* [*Yěrén*, Yeti, and Lake Monsters] (Běijīng: Zhōngguó jiànshè chūbǎnshè, 1988), 29. Chén Nǎiwén and Zhāng Guóyīng participated in the expedition.

Yuán and Huáng noted that the Kǔcōng people's life in the primeval forests had not caused them to grow hair all over their bodies, so why, they asked, should this have happened to conscript evaders?[46] If these authors saw primitive people and *yěrén* to be subject to the same evolutionary processes, at least they distinguished the physical appearance of Kǔcōng from their hairy counterparts. The contributions of nonscientists to the discourse could be less sensitive. In a *Fossils* article, a man from Yúnnán wrote that when he first saw a *yěrén* as "a woman with straggly hair coming out of the forest laughing," he "thought it was a local Wǎ-nationality woman climbing the mountains to collect pig food."[47]

Writers on *yěrén*, moreover, invoked a strongly progressivist understanding of evolution in their theories about *yěrén* and human evolution, in keeping with those found in popular paleoanthropology in general. Liú Mínzhuàng recalled that early investigations in Shénnóngjià gave rise to the theory that the area's hospitable climate and abundant food sources had prevented the competition necessary for *yěrén* to evolve into modern humans. The researchers involved in the 1980–1981 expedition to the Tibetan Plateau shared this theory, and they explicitly compared yeti to the local minority nationalities in this regard. "This environment richly endowed by nature has not only preserved many backward minority nationalities . . . but has also created excellent conditions for '*yěrén*' to escape the cold, seek food, and avoid extinction."[48]

Thus, the *yěrén* literature contributed to discourses on science, superstition, and human origins already very familiar in materials on human evolution the socialist state produced as part of its science dissemination mission. But as he has in popular paleoanthropology in general, Engels has gradually lost his prominence in materials on *yěrén* and fails to appear entirely in most recent books on the subject. Moreover, the scientific community in general is significantly less enthusiastic about *yěrén* today than it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s. *Fossils* magazine stopped publishing articles on *yěrén* in the late 1980s because some at IVPP felt that the failure of scientific expeditions to prove the existence of *yěrén* undermined its validity as a scientific topic.[49] *Fossils* readers today are divided: in a survey of fifty-four people, 32 percent stated that they did not believe *yěrén* existed, 23 percent stated that they believed

46. The authors further referred to the real-life "white-haired girl" who came out of hiding in 1959 after living in the Sìchuān wilderness for twelve years (see chapter 2, note 111), noting that she had not become a *yěrén*. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 8.

47. Lǐ Míngzhí, "Wǒ hé 'yěrén' bódòu" [I Fought with a "*Yěrén*"], *Huàshí*, no. 4 (1984): 6.

48. Liú Mínzhuàng, Chén Nǎiwén, Zhāng Guóyīng, et al., *Yěrén, xuěrén, húguài*, 29.

49. My interview subjects were either unsure who specifically opposed it or unwilling to divulge their names.

yěrén probably existed, and 17 percent stated they thought *yěrén* might exist.[50] Yet even as many scientists have lost hope that the creature will be found, they do not usually scorn the original impetus to study it. And a few paleoanthropologists—most notably IVPP's Yuán Zhènxīn and to a lesser extent the Natural History Museum's Zhōu Guóxīng (formerly of IVPP)—remain committed to the research. In 2005, the anthropology wing of the Natural History Museum still displayed evidence collected from *yěrén* research. And scientists and professional writers alike continue to use the mantle of science dissemination in the materials they produce on *yěrén* for popular audiences.

From Mass Science to Scientific Heroism

If the paired goals of disseminating science and squelching superstition represented one legacy from the Máo era found in *yěrén* literature, mass science was another, though far weaker and shorter lived. As in previous decades, people in early post-Máo China were deeply conflicted about mass science. With the pressure to remain true to socialist principles fading, this conflict has given way to a remarkable lack of interest in the idea that scientists should "rely on the masses." In its place is an enthusiasm for heroic individuals alienated from society in pursuit of personal glory or spiritual fulfillment. Wrapped in these new values, *yěrén* research nonetheless continues to encourage lay participation and challenges to expert authority, both central goals of mass science.

At the heart of discussions about the relationship between *yěrén* and superstition lies the question of the trustworthiness of the masses, and particularly the rural masses. This is always a sticky problem, and in *yěrén* research an unavoidable one. *Yěrén* research, particularly in the early years, consisted primarily of systematic interviews with "eyewitnesses." "Professor of *Yěrén*" Liú Mínzhuàng and other investigators tracked down villagers willing to discuss their encounters with *yěrén*, photographed them, recorded their biographical information and narratives, asked them standard questions, and had them identify the creature they had seen from pictures of apes, bears, fossil hominid reconstructions, and legendary animals found in old encyclopedias.

This was precisely the problem, according to some commentators. A 1989 book on the subject noted that one of the main criticisms of

50. Nineteen percent did not answer the question; 4 percent stated they did not know; 2 percent gave unclear answers; 4 percent thought the term *yěrén* referred to primitive peoples; 4 percent said they exist but are humans gone wild; and 6 percent said they exist but are simply a kind of ape.

yěrén research was that eyewitnesses were all "local people," and never zoologists or anthropologists.[51] Nobel laureate Gāo Xíngjiàn gave voice to such sentiments in his play *Yěrén*, which, though fictional, insightfully and accurately identified prevailing sentiments. A reporter in the play explained, "You see, you cannot rely on what people say. The key is to get hold of some hard evidence."[52] The play's village secretary further questioned the veracity of eyewitness reports: "You can't believe a word these country bumpkins say. They may look honest, but deep down, forget it."[53]

This attitude was certainly well known to people living in Shénnóngjià and other areas rich in *yěrén* sightings. It helps explain the antagonism with which a young macho, Lí Guóhuá, proclaimed he would "kill a *yěrén*, bring its head to the scientific institute, and ask them if there was or wasn't such a thing as *yěrén*!"[54] A cultural troupe member from the nearby city of Yīchāng, Lí had abandoned his job in 1979 to hunt *yěrén* in Shénnóngjià. He had probably encountered and been offended by sentiments such as the one expressed by Gāo's fictional village secretary. Nonetheless, such derogatory claims about rural people's knowledge and trustworthiness were outweighed in the early post-Máo literature by those defending the masses' reliability. For example, in a 1977 speech, Qián Guózhēn—an East China Normal University biology professor—declared, "We must . . . respect the observations of the masses."[55]

"Professor of *Yěrén*" Liú Mínzhuàng took a particularly strong line on this question in his 1988 book. It was with almost audible anger that he recounted the story of the first scientist to respond to reports of *yěrén* in Shénnóngjià. In 1974, the biologist interviewed an eyewitness and found him to be "a peasant lacking knowledge of scientific culture and having backward consciousness." The biologist concluded that the man had fabricated the account to explain his truancy from his work cutting kudzu vines in the mountains. According to Liú, the biologist was not only prejudiced against the man but also very "rude" to him.[56] In contrast, Liú painted paleoanthropologist Wú Rǔkāng as a fair-minded scientist with a proper socialist attitude. Wú was in Húběi in 1975 on unrelated fieldwork when he heard reports of Lǐ Jiàn's investigations.

51. Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, preface, 2.

52. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man: A Contemporary Chinese Spoken Drama," trans. Bruno Roubicek, *Asian Theatre Journal* 7, no. 2 (1990 [1985]): 217.

53. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 237.

54. Stories about Lí Guóhuá are common in post-Máo *yěrén* literature. See, for example, Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 164–168.

55. Qián Guózhēn in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, 115.

56. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 89–90.

He was said to have concluded that the stories were "probably not fabricated" and that investigators "should believe the masses."[57]

If Liú and other *yěrén* researchers professed their trust in the masses as reliable eyewitnesses, they also saw them as necessary participants in *yěrén* investigations. For Liú, rural people were Shénnóngjià's "permanent residents," and therefore they alone could be relied upon to provide accurate information about the local area.[58] In 1980, another observer blamed the failure of early investigations to find *yěrén* on the lack of local residents' participation. Science worker Fán Jǐngquán wrote a letter to the editor of *Fossils* in which he told of his encounter with a *yěrén* mother and child in 1954 while on a geological prospecting mission. Fán had not simply stumbled upon the *yěrén*. Rather, old people living deep in the forest had carefully instructed him on where to go to find them, and how to behave once he had seen them. Fán attributed the ease with which he subsequently discovered the *yěrén* to the forest dwellers' extensive knowledge of their life habits. He chided the investigation team for failing to make adequate use of local hunters and herb collectors as guides, instead employing a large number of soldiers who undoubtedly just "drove the fish into deeper waters."[59]

The notion that *yěrén* research required mass participation was a practical consideration: local people do make good guides. However, it was also rooted in a core vision of socialist science manifested in established practices of paleoanthropology, which depended on local people to report fossil finds, help on the digs, and protect the sites when scientists were away. It is ironic that Máo Guāngnián's Máo-era work on *yěrén* did not involve much if any mass participation, but rather relied extensively on imperial-era texts and more recent scientific reports. Significantly, mass participation in *yěrén* research only flourished in the early post-Máo period. And flourish it did. *Yěrén* proved to be a topic of scientific inquiry with which "the masses" could readily identify. People read fictional and nonfictional accounts of *yěrén* in popular magazines and connected what they read with the stories they had heard from friends and neighbors. For example, one of Sòng Yōuxīng's fans recognized elements of the story recounted in "A *Yěrén* Seeks a Mate" and noted, "I've heard it in my hometown, and it's true."[60]

57. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 91. See note 14 above on the question of whether Wú supported *yěrén* research.

58. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 135.

59. Fán Jǐngquán, "Hé 'yěrén' mǔ zǐ xiāngyù zài lì shùlín" [A Meeting with Mother and Child "Yěrén" in a Chestnut Grove], *Huàshí*, no. 1 (1980), 30.

60. Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō*, 103.

Other Sòng admirers praised the story for "encouraging people to solve the *yěrén* mystery" or "encouraging the masses from relevant places to aid in searching for '*yěrén*' tracks."[61] Scientists Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō were particularly excited by the power of *yěrén* to bring many segments of society together for a single purpose: "All these scientists, cadres, soldiers, and masses . . . some researching the vast stores of ancient texts, some translating foreign materials, some asking to participate in investigation teams, some writing letters to scientific institutions to contribute their own materials, some using their vacation time and their own funds to investigate . . . are all dreaming the same dream of turning this heart-stirring dream into a living fact."[62] Yuán and Huáng could well have added "reading articles in *Fossils* magazine" to this list of activities, since *Fossils* provided an important means for the masses to participate vicariously in IVPP *yěrén* research.

Despite Fán Jǐngquán's concerns to the contrary, mobilizing the masses to participate in *yěrén* investigation arose again and again as a priority among *yěrén* researchers in the early post-Máo era. When "Minister of Yěrén" Lǐ Jiàn and scientists from IVPP and other institutions first formed an investigation team in 1976, nine peasants from the Shénnóngjià area participated, and subsequent missions also usually included local people. Investigators further encouraged mass participation by posting rewards. In 1978, IVPP scientists announced a reward they hoped would spur local Shénnóngjià people to organize their own investigations.[63] At the 1984 meeting of the Chinese Yěrén Investigative Research Association, held in Guǎngxī, members decided to begin posting rewards in several likely places throughout the country in order to "mobilize the masses."[64] The local government in Shénnóngjià offered ten thousand yuán, in those years a princely sum.[65] Occasionally, as was the case with Lí Guóhuá, people inspired by these mobilization efforts ended up dedicating years of their lives to the cause of "solving the *yěrén* mystery."

Like scientists in the early People's Republic, post-Máo *yěrén* researchers also strove to cultivate scientific personas that reduced the apparent distance between intellectual elite and worker and so enhanced the semblance of "mass science." On several occasions, Liú Mínzhuàng empha-

61. Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō*, 106 and 101–102, respectively.

62. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 4.

63. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 96–97, 139.

64. Jùn Gǔ, "'Yěrén' jìxù zài mǒuxiē dìqū chūmò" ["Yěrén" Continue to Appear in Certain Places], *Huàshí*, no. 4 (1984): 7.

65. Zhōu Guóxīng, interview with the author, July 2005.

sized the relative importance of physical experience over book learning in *yěrén* research. For example, he gently criticized Shàng Yùchāng—the scientist who participated in the 1959 survey of the Mount Everest region—for thinking that "all things in books could also be found in nature, and [that] the converse was also true."[66]

Yěrén investigation was not a walk in the park, at least not in the sense that it was easy. *Yěrén* researchers, in the spirit of socialist science, gloried in the struggles and hardships their quest required of them. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō summarized this position neatly in their 1979 article: "In order to take a dreamlike legend and turn it into a real scientific story, the road is long and winding. . . . Marx has said, 'At the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell, the demand must be made: 'Here must all distrust be left; All cowardice must here be dead.'"[67] A 1980 article published in *China Youth News* portrayed *yěrén* investigators in a similar light. The authors characterized them as having two chief characteristics: they were "poor," enduring harsh conditions with limited supplies; and they were "fanatical" (迷, *mí*), absolutely dedicated to their cause.[68] In the preface to his 1988 book, Liú Mínzhuàng waxed poetic, and self-congratulatory, in his description of the "hardships" he had endured to "solve this ancient riddle." "In the deep mountains and old forests of Shénnóngjià, in that limitless ocean of clouds, I welcomed wind and rain, scaled cliffs, ate wild fruits, drank spring water, and lived a *yěrén*'s life. . . . I climbed one thousand mountains, crossed ten thousand *lǐ*, and wrote many hundreds of thousands of words."[69] The trope of the heroic scientist willing to sacrifice himself (or, occasionally, herself) in the name of science is by no means unique to socialist China.[70] Nonetheless, in the immediate post-Máo period, such depictions of struggle and hardship inevitably recalled Máo-era directives to brave any danger on the road to socialism.

Yěrén hunters continue to cultivate heroic personas, but as the association with "mass science" has faded, their individuality—and even isolation—has been highlighted instead. Dedicating one's life to *yěrén* has become not only sacrificing oneself to science, but also doing so at the expense of one's social obligations. When he was interviewed in the

66. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 58–59.

67. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 5. Translation borrowed from Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977 [1859]), 23.

68. Zhāng Xiǎosōng and Bǎi Hóng, "'Yěrén' shì bàn shuì," 4. The suggestive relationship between fanatical (*mí*, 迷) and superstition (*míxìn*, 迷信) was apparently not intended.

69. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, preface, 4. One *lǐ* is equivalent to about one-third of a mile or half a kilometer.

70. See chapter 4, note 46.

late 1980s, Lí Guóhuá said he often went "for weeks or months without seeing people." He said, "I've lived my life in solitude. . . . Maybe I'll be without a family. . . . Maybe I'll die in the forest someday, but I don't regret any of it."[71] A 2000 magazine article described another *yěrén* tracker, Zhāng Jīnxīng, who has spent years in the Shénnóngjià forest, as "an environmentalist and wanderer who, some would say, has completely lost touch with society."[72] The flight to the forest to track *yěrén* has thus been a flight from society.

It has also been a flight from women and family. The men (and they are almost invariably men) who devote themselves to *yěrén* often portray this decision as a choice between *yěrén* and family.[73] Lí Guóhuá was said to have been a heartbreaker among his female coworkers before he took up *yěrén* hunting. According to Liú Mínzhuàng, Lí "gave his heart" instead to China's "newest scientific field."[74] Zhāng Jīnxīng's determination has perhaps been even greater: he left a wife and family when he began his pursuit of *yěrén* in 1995, and proclaimed shortly thereafter, "I won't return to them until I find [a *yěrén*]."[75] The ecologist in Gāo Xíngjiàn's play displays similar tendencies. His marriage is falling apart because of his increasing obsession with the wilderness and with *yěrén*. When he tells his wife he loves her, she replies, "I don't feel it. You love your exploring. The forest and your darling Wild Man."[76] In this respect, the post-Máo *yěrén* enthusiasts represent a sharp break from the Máo era. To transform oneself through struggle was a Maoist notion; to abandon society for personal glory or salvation was not.

A few people, notably Liú Mínzhuàng, continued to talk about the importance of the masses to science well into the 1990s. A 1993 book Liú wrote on Shénnóngjià's geological history and contemporary ecology likewise unabashedly recirculated earlier Maoist sentiments. Quoting from a paper he presented in 1982, he again echoed Máo: "We must have a spirit of smashing cooking pots and sinking boats [i.e., a determination

71. Gene Poirier and Richard Greenwell, *The Wildman of China* (New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1990).

72. Anne Loussouarn, "What's Out in the Woods?" *City Weekend* 1, no. 1 (2000, trial issue): 10.

73. Liú Mínzhuàng recounted the story of a woman doctor who sought to join the search for *yěrén*. He was reluctant to accept her at first, but because she was a basketball player and stronger than the average man, he eventually conceded. Liú called her the first and only woman tracker of *yěrén*. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 244–245. While women scientists and trackers are almost nonexistent in *yěrén* literature, heroic writings on science in the Máo era did sometimes include women.

74. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 164.

75. Andrew Marshall, "In Search of the Wild Man," *South China Morning Post*, 2 September 1995, 1.

76. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 211.

to achieve victory at all costs], and we must study the local language and deeply rely on investigation by the masses."[77]

Liú, however, was unusual in his loyalty to Maoist notions of "trusting the masses." Such sentiments had quietly faded from most writings on *yěrén* by the mid- to late 1980s. And in the 1980s there were already signs from above that "the masses" were not to be trusted at all. In 1985, *People's Daily* printed a story about a monkey recently caught in Húnán Province and profitably displayed to large audiences as a possible living *yěrén* specimen. Rumors spread quickly before primatologists and paleoanthropologists were able to gather and determine that it was not in fact a *yěrén* at all. The author of the article concluded, "We sincerely hope that *yěrén* research will achieve results, and at the same time hope that it will not artificially create a '*yěrén* fever.'"[78] Such concerns intensified in the 1990s, when escalating commercialism prompted some travel agencies to encourage tourism in Shénnóngjià by posting bounties for *yěrén*.[79] The impact of these bounty hunters on the protected forests has provoked official scrutiny. In 1998, another *People's Daily* article went so far as to denounce "unscientific, large-scale '*yěrén*' investigative activities of mass character."[80]

Part of the change in the official value of "mass character" in the 1990s resulted from the government's response to the mass protests at Tiānānmén Square in 1989. In the late 1980s, "people-run institutes" became increasingly important forms of organization for intellectuals seeking democratic reforms.[81] In the wake of 4 June 1989, the government clamped down on people-run organizations like the Yěrén Association and compelled them to submit to the supervision of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. After 1994, the name was changed to Strange and Rare Animals Exploration and Investigation Committee (奇異珍稀動物探險考察專業委員會), and the group officially became part of the Chinese Association for Scientific Expedition (中國科學探險協會), itself overseen by the Chinese Association for Science and Technology (an institution with strong ties to the party). It has remained a "people's" organization, however, in that it does not receive central government funding and

77. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Zhōngguó Shénnóngjià* [China's Shénnóngjià] (Shànghǎi: Wénhuì chūbǎnshè, 1993), 314.

78. Péng Zhùpíng, "Hóu shì zěnyàng 'biàn' rén de? Bǔhuò 'huó yěrén' zhēnxiàng" [How Do Monkeys "Become" Human? Capturing the Truth about the "Living Yěrén"], *Rénmín rìbào*, 14 November 1985, 5.

79. Loussouarn, "What's Out in the Woods?" 10.

80. Niè Xiǎoyáng, "Kǎochá 'yěrén' yào zūnzhòng kēxué hé fǎlù" [In Investigating "Yěrén," People must Respect Science and the Law], *Rénmín rìbào*, 24 December 1998, 11.

81. Gu, "Cultural Intellectuals," 408.

receives little even in the way of funding from the local government in Shénnóngjià. While it has some authority to issue letters of introduction for its members when they wish to enter a remote area for research, the members themselves have to pay any related expenses. Occasionally a generous business owner contributes alcohol or food to its meetings or helps offset printing costs, but otherwise the committee tends to be on its own.[82]

The post-Máo period began with the same contradiction between trust in the masses and doubts about their reliability that characterized China under Máo. "The masses" as an abstracted class category had political capital, while the thoughts and customs of the actual people were politically suspect and often branded "superstition." Moreover, beginning in the 1980s and especially after 1989, the very notion of "following the masses" itself became politically dubious and even dangerous. Despite these changes, however, *yěrén* research has continued to encourage popular participation and even to foster challenges to "expert" authority. Wáng Fāngchén, for example, participates actively in *yěrén* research alongside scientists like IVPP's Yuán Zhènxīn and serves as secretary of the Strange and Rare Animals Exploration and Investigation Committee despite his lack of science education—his background is in media. Wáng was recently quoted in an epigraph to a report on *yěrén* investigations: "So-called experts are only regular people with a little more specialized knowledge. In actuality, experts can also make mistakes, and they can even use scientific methods to turn an entire subject into mistake upon mistake."[83]

Like other "marginal" sciences, the study of *yěrén* necessarily continues to involve contested claims to the authority to speak on questions of science. There are other questions, however, that Wáng and others like him have not explicitly raised. Is there a limit to science's authority to speak? Are there areas of experience outside the scope of what science can explain? Such questions were never broached by mass science, and indeed would have been labeled "superstitious" in the Máo era. Yet, increasingly in the post-Máo period, such questions and the answers generated from popular culture have begun to form a new kind of bottom-up challenge to the top-down model of science dissemination.

82. Interview data, 2002 and 2005. The exhibitions described above (in the sixth paragraph under "*Yěrén* Fever") and other such activities provide some revenue.

83. Zhāng Jīnxīng, *Zhēng zuò Gǔdàoěr, yǒng tàn 'yěrén' mí* [Striving to Be like Goodall, Bravely Exploring the "Yěrén" Mystery] (Běijīng: Zhōngguó kēxué tànxiǎn xiéhuì, 2002), no page number.

Popular Culture Goes Wild

No matter how far the political rhetoric swings away from a celebration of "the masses," what we know about *yěrén* remains deeply rooted in stories told by rural people. Eyewitness accounts and local legends make up the meat and potatoes, the heart and soul, and the bread and butter of *yěrén* literature. The stories inevitably embody ideas about people and their relationships to society and nature. In them, humanity is no longer unambiguously defined by labor. Rather, a host of other categories has come to the fore, generated from the rich troves of popular culture, both rural and urban. These myriad and intertwined themes have included sex, emotion, culture, environment, and even such scientifically dubious concepts as legend and soul. Together, they may be thought of as an exploration of mystery and wild(er)ness. Fiction writers, poets, and other artists have been best positioned to explore these ideas. However, they are by no means absent even in the literature most self-consciously identified as science dissemination.

Receptivity to such ideas has grown stronger as doubts have begun to loom, even among officials in charge of science dissemination, about the infallibility of science in the face of environmental destruction and other problems of the industrial age.[84] Increasingly, people have begun to look away from science for answers about the human condition. Such receptitivity has also been an outcome of the market economy, in which popular science writers have faced new pressures to make their work salable. It is not just sex and sensationalism, however, that the market has favored. *Yěrén*, as a symbol of wildness, have served as a mirror for humanity. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, they have helped people reflect on the perceived restrictiveness and inhumanity of the Máo era. And *yěrén* have continued to offer ways to talk about a range of social and cultural issues pressing in post-Máo China.

Yěrén have been exciting to post-Máo Chinese people in large part because they are mysterious. The concept of "mystery" is common in popular writings on science. A mystery is generally something that is not understood. Within a scientific worldview, a mystery is more accurately not *yet* understood—it is solvable through the application of scientific methodology provided sufficient material evidence is available. In science dissemination literature, mysteries typically form the starting points for scientific investigation; they are the reason for beginning a scientific investigation in the first place. Writings on *yěrén*, like other types

84. Léi Qǐhóng and Shí Shùnkē, interview with the author, 26 July 2002.

of science dissemination literature, have emphasized mystery. Many use the word "mystery" (謎, *mí*) in the title and express an interest in "solving" or "cracking" the "*yěrén* mystery." Nonetheless, I would argue that much of the popular appeal of the *yěrén* mystery lies in its resistance to being solved, in its open-endedness. The public's interest in such phenomena is greatly aroused both by "the sensational and mysterious aspects of anomaly sightings" and by a resentment of science's "posture of infallibility."[85] The mystery that science cannot—or at the very least, has been persistently unable to—solve is thus an alluring subject.

Yěrén have also been exciting to post-Máo Chinese people because they are wild. Wildness may often bear an ugly face and a violent temper, but the very horror of these traits provides the basis for a kind of liberation and even healing.[86] The wildness of *yěrén* and their ancestors in imperial-era Chinese texts is expressed most vividly in their pronounced sexuality. The *jué* of old were said to be "purely male and without females . . . and good at stealing human women to serve as their mates and bear their children" (figure 21).[87] Another creature, *zhǒu* (貙), was a *jué* "with the males and females reversed," in other words, the species consisting only of females who stole human men for their mates.[88] "Wild women" or "wild wives" (野婆), also known as *xīngxing* (猩猩), were similarly "groups of females without males who dash up mountains and down valleys . . . [and] whenever they encounter men, they carry them off on their backs to seek a union."[89] Encounters with such creatures could be quite grisly, particularly when the abductee was female. The famous Qīng-dynasty writer and folklorist Yuán Méi recorded a story from Shǎnxī Province in which a "hairy person" abducted a woman who had ventured outside at night to urinate. When her husband and village neighbors found her

85. Ron Westrum, "Knowledge about Sea Serpents," in Wallis, *On the Margins of Science*, 308.

86. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 220.

87. The *jué* appear in Chinese writings at least as early as the *Records of the Search for Spirits* (搜神記, ca. A.D. 350), where they are already said to steal human women. This text further locates *jué* in the southwest of Shǔ (modern day Sìchuān) and suggests that many people who live in the area and are surnamed Yáng are the descendants of such unions. The account is in the twelfth chapter of the twenty-chapter edition and is the 308th story. See Gān Bǎo, *Sōu shén jì quán yì* [Records of the Search for Spirits, Complete and Interpreted], ed. Huáng Dímíng (Guìyáng: Guìzhōu rénmín chūbǎnshè, 1991 [ca. 350]), 350–351. For an English translation, see Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, Jr., *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 148–149.

88. Chén Mèngléi, ed. *Gǔjīn túshū jíchéng, qínchóng diǎn* [Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present, Volume on Animals] (Táiběi: Dingwen shuju, 1971 [1726–1728]), 51:852–853. This encyclopedia gathered materials from diverse sources and listed them together under each entry. The quotations cited here originated in Lǐ Shízhēn's 1602 *Classified Materia Medica*.

89. Also from Lǐ Shízhēn, who cited a Táng-dynasty text as his source. In modern usage, *xīngxing* means orangutan. Chén Mèngléi, *Gǔjīn túshū jíchéng*, 51:856.

the next day, she had been tied up, raped, and killed. "Her lips had giant bite marks, the area around her genitals was broken open and torn apart [to the point that] all her bones could be seen, and there was more than a pint of blood mixed with white semen on the ground."[90]

This story, and others like it, have been recirculated in post-Máo writings on *yěrén*. Similar accounts, though none so gruesome, have continued to be reported in China, particularly in Shénnóngjià and in the southwestern province of Guǎngxī. In Shénnóngjià, *yěrén* researchers have investigated accounts of "monkey babies" (猴娃) resulting from rapes of human women by monkeys and/or *yěrén*. Cautious even from the beginning, serious researchers now appear to agree that the "monkey babies" are results of birth defects or atavism rather than interspecies crossing.[91] Nonetheless, abduction stories have provided the juiciest fodder for creative writers of *yěrén* fiction. And particularly when the *yěrén* abductor is female, the encounter is not always portrayed in an entirely negative light.

In Sòng Yōuxīng's "A *Yěrén* Seeks a Mate," published in 1985, a voluptuous and kind-hearted female *yěrén* abducts a man in Guǎngxī Province to sire her child. The *yěrén*'s large breasts and long, attractive hair (figure 3) do not reflect merely this author's imagination. Female *yěrén* are often portrayed this way in fiction, and such descriptions frequently make their way into scientists' prose via eyewitness testimonies.[92] In biologist Wáng Zélín's recollection of a female *yěrén* he had seen in 1941, "The two breasts were very big, and the nipples very red." A witness in 1982 reported a female *yěrén* with big breasts and long hair who was "prettier than a monkey."[93] Gāo Xíngjiàn took up this breast obsession in his play *Yěrén* when one of his characters, an eyewitness, described the *yěrén* he saw. "It had two breasts. Obviously a female. Those breasts . . ."[94] Unfor-

90. "A Big Hairy Person Snatches a Woman" (大毛人攫女) is reprinted in Jiāng Tíngān and Yún Zhōnglóng, *"Yěrén" xún zōng jì*, 107–108. It originated in Yuán Méi's collection *What Confucius Did Not Discuss* (子不語), which contained several accounts of "hairy people" and other apelike creatures. Yuán Méi, *Zhèng xù Zǐ bù yǔ* [What Confucius Did Not Discuss, Corrected and Continued] (Táiběi: Xīnxìng shūjú, 1978), 5149, 5241, 5272.

91. In 1980, Liú Mínzhuàng rejected the theory that "monkey babies" were monkey-human crosses because of the differences between the two species. He held out for the possibility of *yěrén*-human hybridization, but suggested an alternative theory that "monkey babies" were instances of atavism (返祖). Liú Mínzhuàng, "Hóu wá zhī mí" [The Mystery of Monkey Babies], *Kēxué huàbào*, no. 4 (1980): 32–33. On the birth defect theory, see Loussouarn, "What's Out in the Woods?" 11; J. Richard Greenwell and Frank E. Poirier, "Is There a Large, Unknown Primate in China? The Chinese Yeren or Wildman," *Cryptozoology* 11 (1992): 72.

92. For examples in fiction, see Chén Yùlóng, "'Yěrén' yìshì," 41; Liú Yǒuhuá, "Yěrén zhài," 58, 61; Zī Fēng, *Yěrén qiú'ǒu jì*, 11, 141.

93. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 52, 241.

94. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 214.

tunately for us, his interviewer impatiently interrupted him at this point in his narrative.

Sòng Yōuxīng's story provoked quite a stir with its titillating account of the intimate and erotic feelings shared by the female *yěrén* and her human mate. Yet many readers appeared more moved by the *yěrén*'s dispositional virtues than her physical assets. The Hong Kong reprinting of the story included an appendix of fan letters received by the author. A "woman worker" wrote, "As a woman, I was holding back tears as I finished [the story]. I really empathized with this warm-hearted '*yěrén*' girl." A "single male" reader was struck specifically by the *yěrén*'s concern for her family. "She loves her husband, much surpassing some of the women in our own lives. She has feelings and righteousness. In the end she cannot find her husband and child so she stops eating and dies. How can this not cause people to be moved?"[95]

Sòng Yōuxīng and his fans would seem to have answered the question posed by a later nonfiction writer on the subject: "Do *yěrén* have the emotion of love? One would never dream that love resides in the primeval savage wilderness."[96] The notion that *yěrén* indeed experience and express love for their families is found not only in fictional accounts, but in eyewitness narratives and investigators' analyses. In 1976, villagers in Shénnóngjià reported a pregnant female *yěrén* traveling through the area to meet up with her "husband." "Professor of *Yěrén*" Liú Mínzhuàng theorized that all the *yěrén* sighted in Fāngxiàn County near Shénnóngjià belonged to the same "family," and that one particularly belligerent *yěrén*'s behavior could be explained as a wild rage after his mate had been killed.[97]

These portraits of *yěrén* love present an interesting mixture of wildness, eroticism, and passion on the one hand, and human compassion, loyalty, and traditional values on the other. Both of these elements can be traced to a reaction against Cultural Revolution–era gender neutrality and attacks on traditional family values. The 1980s saw a dramatic change in ideals of womanhood. "The fervor and enthusiasm with which women beautified themselves, the widespread support for moving women back into 'suitable' lines of work, the discussions of womanly virtues in the press, must all be understood in part as a reaction to Cultural Revolution norms."[98]

95. Sòng Yōuxīng, *Yěrén de chuánshuō*, 104, 105.

96. Zāng Yǒngqīng, *Yěrén mí zōng*, 91.

97. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 95, 180.

98. Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 7.

The resulting tension between a renewed interest in feminine sexuality and pressures on couples to return to more traditional relationships is clear in Sòng's short story, published not long after the campaigns against pornography and other forms of "spiritual pollution" that began in 1983. Just as Sòng had defended his choice to write about *yěrén* by saying that he was promoting science and not superstition, Sòng and several of his readers defended the story against charges of obscenity by saying that it promoted good human values. They pointed especially to the female *yěrén*'s traditional womanly virtues—her warm-heartedness and her loyalty to husband and family. Sòng's statements about his own marriage further established his position on this subject. In an interview, he praised his wife for her attention to household chores and called her by the appelation popular in the nineteenth century, "dutiful wife and loving mother" (賢妻良母). Sòng's female *yěrén* symbolized a break not only from the sexual restrictiveness of the Cultural Revolution, but also from its ideals of gender neutrality, and moreover from its privileging of politics over loyalty to one's mate and family.

The use of a "wild person" as a symbol of human sentiment was striking to contemporary readers. The "single male" reader of Sòng's story found the female *yěrén* to surpass the human women of his experience in womanly virtue. With "feelings and righteousness," Sòng's *yěrén* embodied a humanity that resonated strongly within Confucian tradition—and with the writings of Máo-era intellectuals like Wáng Rènshū, whose theory of a "human nature" based on "universal human feeling" had suffered attacks in the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, one review criticized Sòng's humanistic portrayal of the *yěrén*. The reviewers found Sòng's style "too simple," with the result that "the 'human nature' [人性] of the *yěrén* seems greater than that of the human."[99] Yet this is precisely the strength of *yěrén* symbolism. Granting human nature to a literal "savage" makes possible a damning criticism of less-than-civilized humans. When the protagonist of Gāo Xíngjiàn's novel *Soul Mountain* arrives in Shénnóngjià in the early 1980s, he wonders, "When the world is becoming increasingly incomprehensible, where man and mankind's behavior is so strange that humans don't know how humans should behave, why are they looking for the Wild Man?"[100] An answer may be found in Zhōu Liángpèi's 1986 poem "I Am *Yěrén*" (我是野人), in which the "I" who is *yěrén* tells the reader: "If we look at one another,

99. Wáng Píng and Lǜ Xuě, "Guǎngxī 'tōngsú wénxué rè' diàochá jì" [An Investigation of Guǎngxī's "Popular Literature Fever"], *Wényì bào*, no. 2 (1985): 40.

100. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York: Harper Collins, 2000 [1990]), 364.

we'll see who still retains a tail / You are my bright mirror, and I am yours."[101]

For both Gāo and Zhōu, *yěrén* became a "bright mirror" held up to reflect the barbarity of civilization, the inhumanity of humanity. The suitability of *yěrén* for this task lay first of all in their own primitiveness and thus their immunity from the evils associated with "civilization." Here Gāo and Zhōu evoked a theme made long familiar in China by the Daoist classics of Zhuāngzǐ and Lǎozǐ and in the West by Rousseau's "natural man."[102] *Yěrén* were also connected to the "traditional" cultures that had preserved them in legend. Zhōu Liángpèi's poem frequently refers to *yěrén* through such images of the distant past as "the history book," "the primeval soul not stained by the dirt of custom," "the life fixed in prehistory yet still living today," and "the not-yet-civilized wildness." In a particularly telling stanza, he explains, "I only fear that people's hearts are not ancient; it is a modern anxiety / The search for searching often resides in returning to the origin / The art of art often resides in going back to truth."[103] Gāo Xíngjiàn was engaged in a similar root-searching endeavor when he wrote *Yěrén*. In his preface to the play, he notes that his research included visits to the Yángzǐ River valley, where he witnessed priests and shamans performing rituals he associates with the "the origins of Chinese theatre." A character in the play gives voice to Gāo's concern for these people and the ancient practices they have preserved: "These days sorcerers are a rare commodity. If we want to understand the past, we must respect them and try to understand their ways. Like Wild Men, they are dying out fast." Another character suggests: "We could link [*yěrén*] with mankind's evolution and countless folktales and legends and help to explain these myths. Perhaps we can give a new lease on life to some of those old stories, and . . ." At this point, we are told, the speaker's "excitement turns to sorrow."[104] As Gāo rightly ascertained, legends themselves were threatened with extinction. If rehabilitating them through science was their best hope for survival, this was a sad state of affairs. Gāo and Zhōu's views on legend thus

101. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí* [*Yěrén* Collection] (Běijīng: Huáxià chūbǎnshè, 1992), 97. The "tail" here is symbolic only. In legends and eyewitness accounts, *yěrén* do not have tails.

102. On Rousseau's influence on his contemporaries' approaches to feral children, see Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 106–108, 112–113.

103. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 97–98.

104. A Chinese literary movement that began in the 1980s, root searching (尋根) is identified with the search for the origins of Chinese culture, especially among rural and ethnic minority people. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 192, 239, 244.

differed from those of science disseminators and some fiction writers who stood firmly on the side of science and against superstition.

Despite the continued vigilant attitude toward superstition on the part of officials and many intellectuals, the interest Zhōu and Gāo expressed in primitivism was widely shared among intellectuals in the post-Máo period and was actually encouraged by changes in official policy regarding minority nationalities. While still pursuing integration, officials began once again to encourage ethnic minorities to identify themselves as such by wearing traditional dress and speaking their mother tongues (although only in addition to the national language).[105] The late 1970s and early 1980s saw an artistic renaissance inspired by the arts of minority nationalities, as in the Yúnnán School of painting that emerged during this period.[106] Filmmakers and novelists of the 1980s also eagerly tapped the subject of minority nationalities. These primarily Hàn Chinese intellectuals were drawn to "the minority other" because they "enjoyed freedoms that had been denied to the Hàn subject, who was seen to be doubly tormented by the strictures of Confucianism and the aesthetic practices of Maoist socialism."[107] For writers like Zhōu and Gāo, *yěrén*'s wildness and association with "primitive" cultures evoked a similar sense of freedom.

Zhōu and Gāo thus shared with Sòng Yōuxīng an attraction to the freedom symbolized by *yěrén*, but the types of freedom were different. While Sòng focused on a kind of sexual freedom and rejected "legend," Zhōu and Gāo celebrated legend and moreover expressed concerns that were explicitly political. Both Zhōu and Gāo used *yěrén* as a mirror to reflect on the viciousness of Máo-era political campaigns. Zhōu's introduction to his 1992 book of poetry, entitled *Yěrén Collection*, explained that his motivation for writing "I Am *Yěrén*" in 1986 lay in his experience during the Cultural Revolution. Zhōu's foot was hurt, and his inability to obtain medical care made the injury permanent.[108] Gāo Xíngjiàn likewise linked *yěrén* to the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution and other Máo-era campaigns. In *Yěrén*, a villager informs a visiting scientist, "There was a professor here once who criticized someone for shooting a songbird. . . . They tortured him to death during the Cultural

105. June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 237–247.

106. Joan Cohen, *Yunnan School: A Renaissance in Chinese Painting* (Minneapolis: Fingerhut Group Publishers, 1988), 25.

107. Ralph Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 231.

108. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 1–7.

Revolution. If a man tortures another, he's worse than a wild animal."[109] In *Soul Mountain*, the protagonist hears of a disturbing encounter with a creature thought at first to be a *yěrén*. It turns out instead to be a man who has escaped from a labor camp where he had been sent during an antirightist campaign. Too frightened to return to society, he has been living in the mountains ever since.[110] This story and others like it recall the much older story of the Great Wall conscript evaders, who lost their humanity when the first emperor's cruelty forced them to flee into the wilderness. Such stories accomplish sophisticated political critiques by suggesting that inhumane treatment can result in a loss of humanity, a passing back into the realm of beasts.

The use of *yěrén* to question civilization from the perspective of "wild people" cannot be separated from the emergence of an environmental movement in China in the 1980s and 1990s. Zhōu Liángpèi's poem portrayed Shénnóngjià as "trees full of ancient mosses" threatened by the "felling circle pressing closer." He warned, "Cutting down [trees], capturing [wild animals], the great mountain falls into a terror from which it has no power to save itself."[111] In Gāo Xíngjiàn's play, *yěrén* served as spokespeople for the forests. In one telling moment, an ecologist responds to news of a logging road under construction by asking, "What would our Wild Man think about that?" Bruno Roubicek, who translated the play into English, credited Gāo for "presag[ing] the warnings against deforestation that have appeared in the Chinese press since its premiere" in 1985.[112]

Gāo's play certainly stands as a beautiful and strong defense of nature, and especially forests, against wanton destruction in the name of socialism and private profit alike. Nonetheless, Gāo was not the first to introduce this theme, nor was he original in linking deforestation with the question of *yěrén*. Already in the late 1950s, the socialist state had become attuned to the consequences of deforestation for endangered animals, most notably the giant panda.[113] These priorities have had enormous influence on *yěrén* research from the beginning. As early as 1964, Máo Guāngnián stated emphatically, "Because of their small numbers, their [evolutionary] closeness to humans, and some other characteristics, I

109. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 225.

110. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, 385–388.

111. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 97–98.

112. Gao Xingjian, "Wild Man," 201, 186.

113. Elena Songster, "A Natural Place for Nationalism: The Wanglang Nature Reserve and the Emergence of the Giant Panda as a National Icon" (Ph.D. diss.: University of California, San Diego, 2004).

believe that the *jué* species [his preferred term for "*yěrén*"] are worth earnestly researching, protecting, and breeding."[114]

Post-Máo writings on *yěrén* have increasingly focused on environmental protection and have frequently tied the question of *yěrén* directly to the question of pandas. In a 1977 speech at a meeting of the *yěrén* investigation team in Shénnóngjià, Qián Guózhēn noted that fossils of pandas and of *Gigantopithecus* had been discovered in the same areas, what he termed an "ancient 'panda-*Gigantopithecus* belt.'" He professed his belief that pandas were not alone in their ability to change their food habits and survive the ravages of time, but rather shared this characteristic with *Gigantopithecus*. Like pandas, *Gigantopithecus* (or "*yěrén*") were now on the verge of extinction. Protecting them was "an issue of great international significance in terms of politics, philosophy, and science."[115] Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō's 1979 article in *Fossils* made the same point. They worried that with widespread deforestation *yěrén* would become extinct before their existence could be proven, and they explicitly linked their own research and interest in protecting *yěrén* with panda research and preservation.[116] Similarly, Zhōu Guóxīng cited the possibility that Shénóngjià harbored *yěrén* as a compelling reason to create a nature reserve there.[117] While there were many other good reasons, it is likely that the excitement over *yěrén* helped make the reserve a reality in 1983.[118]

More recently, *yěrén* trackers like Lí Guóhuá, Yuán Yùháo, and Zhāng Jīnxīng have become directly involved in environmental protection. Lí and Yuán both participated as lay members of the 1970s *yěrén* investigations; both now work for the Shénnóngjià nature reserve (Lí as a photographer and disseminator, and Yuán as a ranger). Zhāng has modeled himself on Jane Goodall, both in his immersion style of research and his commitment to educating the public about the importance of saving the wilderness.[119]

What was new to environmental discourse beginning in the 1980s was the criticism of modernity, progress, and human civilization itself.

114. Máo Guāngnián in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, 122.

115. Máo Guāngnián in Wáng Bō, *Yěrén zhī mí*, 115–116.

116. Yuán Zhènxīn and Huáng Wànbō, "'Yěrén' zhī mí," 3–4.

117. Zhōu Guóxīng, "Shénnóngjià 'yěrén' kǎochá," 30.

118. Dù Yǒnglín attributes the inspiration for the Húběi Forestry Department's initial 1978 proposal of a nature reserve in Shénnóngjià to a 1977 report from a *yěrén* investigation team. See Dù Yǒnglín, *Yěrén: Lái zì Shénnóngjià de bàogào* [*Yěrén*: Report from Shénnóngjià] (Běijīng: Sānxiǎ chūbǎnshè, 1995), 101.

119. Lí Guóhuá, interview with the author, 17 April 2002; Yuán Yùháo, interview with the author, 16 April 2002; Zhāng Jīnxīng, interview with the author, 18 April 2002. Zhāng Jīnxīng, *Zhēng zuò Gǔdàoěr*, 4.

In the historical context of a growing awareness of environmental degradation, the dominance of humans over all other creatures has been questioned. The signs have been reversed: the all-too-human capacity for destruction is labeled "savage," and people are called upon to reshape themselves in the image of nature—as caretakers of the forest that once sheltered our tree-dwelling ancestors. To quote from the 1986 poem "I am *Yěrén*," "Heaven and earth are inverted and spinning in karmic retribution."[120]

Also new in the post-Máo era is an appreciation for nature as a source of spiritual comfort and enlightenment. For many of the most devoted *yěrén* hunters and popularizers, saving the environment has come to mean saving themselves, and searching for *yěrén* has meant searching for their own souls. For the poet Zhōu Liángpèi, what was needed was a "primeval soul not stained by the dirt of custom." Such a soul could be found, for Zhōu and others, in a return to nature. Lí Guóhuá, who in the late 1970s claimed to want to kill a *yěrén* and bring its head to the scientific institute, told American film makers a decade after he began his search: "My life came from nature, and I might end my life going back to nature. It's as if my soul has been possessed by nature, possessed by *yěrén*."[121] Similarly, a newspaper reporter commented in 1988 that "Professor of *Yěrén*" Liú Mínzhuàng "long ago committed his life to the search for nature's mysteries. His spirit resides in Shénnóngjià."[122] Nature offered a space away from the troubles of civilization to find oneself again. "In the pathless forest, to be lost does not count as being lost," said the poet Zhōu Liángpèi.[123] "I seek your protection, you seek my shelter," says Zhōu's *yěrén* narrator, speaking for the forests.

It is just this shelter, this finding oneself by losing oneself, that has drawn some people deeper and deeper into the forests in their search for wild people, wilderness, or wildness. It is not uncommon to find them consciously drawing on the rich resources of Daoist philosophy to express this impulse. When the narrator of *Soul Mountain* arrives in

120. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 97. This is where my analysis of the cultural meaning of wildness in post-Máo China departs from Taussig's analysis of it in other times and places. In the cases Taussig examines, the healing power of wildness resides in the way it "tears through the tired dichotomies of good and evil, order and chaos" and inevitably "emerge[s] on the side of the grotesque and the destructive" (*Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 220).

121. Poirier and Greenwell, *The Wildman of China*. Lí currently works as a wildlife photographer in the propaganda and education department of the Shénnóngjià nature reserve. Lí Guóhuá, interview with the author, 17 April 2002.

122. Yǐn Sǔnjūn, "Hún xì Shénnóngjià" [His Spirit Is Tied to Shénnóngjià], *Chángjiāng rìbào,* 19 January 1988, 3.

123. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 98.

Shénnóngjià, he feels ambivalent about the idea of looking for *yěrén*, and says, "Not having a goal is a goal, the act of searching itself turns into a sort of goal, and the object of the search is irrelevant."[124] Zhōu Liángpèi's "pathless forest" and his line "The search for searching often resides in returning to the origin" similarly evoke a Daoist rejection of ambition in favor of the freedom that can be found only in nature.

The most enthusiastic of the *yěrén* enthusiasts, and the most desperate of the socially persecuted, do not simply search for *yěrén*, they become *yěrén*. When Lí Guóhuá returned from tracking *yěrén*, his coworkers exclaimed that he had "turned into a *yěrén*." Liú Mínzhuàng said that he "lived a *yěrén*'s life." The narrator of *Soul Mountain* imagined himself fleeing the inhumanity of society and becoming a *yěrén*.[125] Some *yěrén* trackers have intentionally altered their appearance to resemble *yěrén* with the hope that this will facilitate encounters with the real thing.[126] Zhāng Jīnxīng, who has forsworn shaving until he finds a *yěrén*, reportedly has "detractors" who "joke that he's searching for himself" (figure 22).[127] Clearest of all is Zhōu Liángpèi, the poet who survived the ravages of the Cultural Revolution to become a *yěrén*, spokesperson for the trees and for all threatened by inhumanity and carelessness.

I am the *yěrén* you yearn for, you fear, you hate,
and because of this don't understand, the *yěrén* your wide open eyes are searching for!
. . .
I, Shénnóngjià's *yěrén*!
I am the being in which you believe,
I am the outcome of your thoughts and searches.[128]

While such metamorphoses are undoubtedly quite rare in practice, they are common enough in the popular imaginary that Liú Mínzhuàng included a warning in his 1988 book. Just as Liú distinguished *yěrén* from members of "primitive tribes," he also explained the difference between *yěrén* and "people gone wild" (野化人), who are "modern humans who run away to the deep mountains and eat wild fruits, do not wear clothes, and do not make tools."[129]

124. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, 342.
125. Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, 389.
126. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 175.
127. Zhāng Jīnxīng, *Zhēng zuò Gǔdàoěr*, 11; Loussouarn, "What's Out in the Woods?" 9.
128. Zhōu Liángpèi, *Yěrén jí*, 98–99.
129. Liú Mínzhuàng, *Jiēkāi 'yěrén' zhī mí*, 265. A 1951 book on human evolution described "feral"

22 Zhāng Jīnxīng, who has sworn not to shave his beard until he catches a *yěrén*. This photograph nicely captures Zhāng's deliberate efforts to blur the lines between human and animal, scientist and subject, hunter and quarry. The photograph, by Sahid Maher, appears in Anne Loussouarn's "What's Out in the Woods?" the cover article for a 2000 trial issue of an expatriate English-language magazine, *City Weekend*, published in Běijīng.

It is this constant need to distinguish *yěrén* from humans, to explain in what ways they are and are not similar to us, that has made them such a rich subject in popular culture. Their slippery status requires constant attention to definitions, and the process of defining inspires thoughtful reflection on what humanity is, what it is not, and what it should be. Creatures that are almost, but not quite, human have made their way into stories all over the world in ancient as well as modern times. The

people who grew up among wild animals as *yěrén*. The author explained that although they had the physical ability to speak, their lack of social labor precluded it. Lín Yàohuá, *Cóng yuán dào rén de yánjiū* [Research on from Ape to Human] (Běijīng: Gēngyún chūbǎnshè, 1951), 59.

opening of the publishing market in the 1980s and 1990s helped such stories circulate in China more freely than before. However, the emergence of *yěrén* fever in post-Máo China is not simply the sudden satisfaction of long-held interest. Changes in post-Máo China have raised deep questions that call out for cultural icons like *yěrén*. As a symbol of the wild, *yěrén* have been ideally suited to aid in the exploration of sex and human values, tradition and modernity, development and environment, society and self.

As a "mystery," *yěrén* have also helped raise questions about the omnipotence of science. While many continue to see *yěrén* along with other "mysteries" as scientific questions bound to be answered conclusively, others have been reluctant to cede all to science. Appeals to legend, spirit, and wildness have allowed a space for ideas generated from popular culture to take on fundamental questions about humanity and society. This space is *not* outside science. Science is not sheltered from popular culture. Rather, popular culture has mingled with science, and thus made popular science truly popular.

Conclusion

Yěrén literature reflects enormous uncertainties about science and culture in post-Máo China. The crusade against superstition in the name of science is by no means over—as evidenced in recent years by the official response against the Fǎlún Gōng movement and the increased attention science dissemination has received as a result. Much of *yěrén* writing is still justified in terms of an attack on superstition via the time-honored means of science dissemination. Moreover, this top-down model of scientific knowledge production and dissemination no longer meets any officially sanctioned challenge from a bottom-up model of "mass science," either in rhetoric or in practical programs.

Nonetheless, the boundaries between science and popular culture have become more, not less, porous in the post-Máo period. Paleoanthropologists have authored popular accounts of *yěrén* research, which in turn is based on stories told by rural people. Fiction writers have used the *yěrén* research as inspiration for sensational stories and sensitive explorations into what it means to be human. And laypeople have used the marginal position of *yěrén* research as a way to enter the scientific arena and challenge the reigning authorities therein.

This is not to say that the old prejudices against the masses as superstitious are disappearing—if anything, they may be more virulent. The market is perfectly capable of exploiting the riches of popular culture

without giving credit where credit is due. The heroes of *yěrén* literature are rarely local people; only urbanites can credibly "return to nature," and only moderns can search for a "primeval soul." Whether acknowledged or not, however, popular culture—even in its most allegedly superstitious forms—has unquestionably gained greater influence in science dissemination writing and even scientific research.

This chapter opened with an account of a scientist who "recognized" a statue of Peking Man. He had "seen it before" during an encounter with a creature he learned to call "*yěrén*." *Yěrén* and Peking Man have become intertwined in the post-Máo period, an association that has enhanced the popularity of Peking Man and the science she represents. People drawn by the mystery of *yěrén* to purchase books on the subject are often exposed to established theories of and evidence for human evolution. *Yěrén* literature has similarly glamorized the scientific investigation of human origins and the profession of science as a whole. The rugged, heroic personas that scientists in the early People's Republic worked to cultivate are well disseminated in recent writings on *yěrén*. And the *yěrén* does something for popular paleoanthropology that its slightly less popular "twin," Peking Man, does somewhat less well. As a paradoxical "living legend," it has the power simultaneously to seem real and to inspire the imagination. *Yěrén* have encouraged people to reflect on humanity and society and to imagine "a different and better condition."[130]

Not everyone will agree that *yěrén* research—or Bigfoot research, for that matter—is a legitimate scientific enterprise. Some question the scientific rigor of its assumptions and methodology; others worry what harm is done to legend when it is shoe-horned into science. Yet I believe it has had cultural value in post-Máo China. It has offered a way for science, literature, and legend to come together in an exploration of humanity and inhumanity, wild(er)ness and civilization, so necessary in China's rapidly changing social and natural worlds.

130. Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997), 15–16. My thoughts on the relationship between Peking Man and *yěrén* are strikingly similar to Penley's analysis of NASA and *Star Trek* as popular science "twins."